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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000391

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER
DEPT PASS TO EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: GOL INEFFICIENCY IN AIDING SHIA BENEFITS
HIZBALLAH, MODERATE LEADERS SAY

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Reasons for Hizballah's popularity and what the GOL could do to counter it were the dominant themes of discussion at a March 13 dinner with moderate Shia figures hosted by Charge Sison. Some of the guests noted that tangible assistance to underdeveloped Shia areas was the most effective way to win over Shia hearts and minds. In their opinion, the problem is not that the GOL is reluctant to give economic assistance to Shia, but rather the inefficient way it goes about doing so, often benefiting Hizballah and its ally the Amal party.

¶2. (C) In addition, GOL efforts to include Shia in the political process are perceived as token and do not give Shia any real decision-making power. Thus, Lebanon's Shia have turned to Hizballah as an effective alternative government which they can depend on to look out for their interests.

¶3. (C) Of particular interest were former Minister and Amal movement member Mohamed Beydoun's comments on the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) potential as a unifying force in the country, provided it undergoes much needed reforms. Beydoun is pessimistic about the current political crisis and predicts the country is heading towards another civil war, albeit of a different sort than the one which erupted in ¶1975. End summary.

AN ECLECTIC,
BUT (SUPERFICIALLY) COMPATIBLE GROUP

¶4. (C) On March 13, the Charge d'Affaires hosted a dinner for a group of prominent Shia not affiliated with Hizballah. The guests included former minister and former Amal Movement member Mohamed Beydoun; former Ambassador Khalil al-Khalil; Senior Director of Lebanon's Central Bank Financial Operations Department Youssef al-Khalil; Hassan Husseini, son of former Speaker of Parliament and MP Hussein Husseini; political activist and head of Haya Binaa (Let's Go) NGO Loukman Slim; and Naamat Kanan, a former director general of the Ministry of Social Affairs. While the guests were united in their conviction that Lebanon cannot succeed as a sovereign state if Hizballah continues to undermine state institutions, there were clear differences as to how to deal with Hizballah.

AID TO THE SOUTH:

A MIXTURE OF SUCCESS
AND LOST OPPORTUNITIES

15. (C) A native of Tyre in the south, Dr. Khalil is a proponent of revitalizing south Lebanon's economy through micro-enterprise agricultural programs. He founded and chairs the Association for Rural Development (ARD). Since 2003 ARD has worked with a USAID-funded NGO. Al-Khalil noted that for Shia in the south collaborating with USG-funded NGOs is acceptable; working directly with the USG is not. Apologetically, he remarked that assistance from the American people is viewed favorably by Shia in the south, whereas funding known to come directly from the current administration is not.

16. (C) All the guests agreed that the GOL mismanaged assistance and compensation programs for the south after the July 2006 war. Beydoun pointed out that PM Siniora gave authority to Parliament Speaker and Hizballah ally Nabih Berri to distribute compensation to Shia citizens. He could have given this responsibility to another prominent Shia, and thus avoid having Hizballah and Berri's Amal Movement get credit for the distribution of compensation.

17. (C) Al-Khalil noted that after the 2006 war, Shia farmers in the south were very critical of Hizballah, but the GOL did nothing to help them and thus missed a golden opportunity to improve its standing in the Shia community, something which has proved to be a costly mistake.

LIMITED SHIA ACCESS
TO DECISIONMAKERS

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18. (C) Ambassador Khalil noted that the political struggle in Lebanon is the issue of how much decisionmaking authority a minority has within a majority government. Because of the absence of Shia in the GOL, Hizballah and Amal get most of the Shia support. Khalil pointed out that PM Siniora has no Shia in his inner circle of advisors, unlike Future Movement leader Saad Hariri. All the guests agreed that (in a future government) there needed to be a concrete plan for the Shia community, not just the naming of some Shia cabinet ministers.

CAN THE LAF SAVE LEBANON
FROM ANOTHER CIVIL WAR?

19. (C) Beydoun maintained that Hizballah cannot be a political party; its militia must be absorbed into the LAF and re-trained. In Beydoun's view, the LAF itself is very weak, and needs to be restructured. He further noted the importance of LAF outreach to youth, and especially Shia youth, so that potential soldiers develop loyalty to the national army, and not individual militias. Beydoun believes that Lebanon is heading toward another civil war. However, in contrast to the one that broke out in 1975, which was between separate militias, the next war will be between militia organizations and the state.

COMMENT

110. (C) There was perceptible, if slight, disagreement among these moderate Shia concerning the extent of the danger Hizballah poses. Whereas some of the guests (Beydoun, Husseini) see Hizballah as an organization that can be integrated into Lebanon, others (Ambassador Khalil, Loukman Slim) view it as a force controlled by Iran and Syria that is intent only on dominating Lebanon. End comment.

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